

When You Are Old and Grey and Full of Sleep

by eirenical

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Summary: Normally Sheila is brazen, goes straight after what she wants whenever she wants it, a conquering general on a battlefield, a fighting wolf that goes straight for the throat. This is different. Jeanie can feel it. This isn't a kiss. This is a dare.

When You Are Old and Grey and Full of Sleep

OK, so the boys of Hair are not the only slashable characters. I've felt a little bit of a Jeanie/Sheila vibe ever since seeing Kacie and Caissie in the roles (and pictures of their Joe's Pub concert, OMG), and seeing Caren and Kacie in the roles just made it that much more obvious for me. They have a few really sweet moments in Act II and I've been wanting to fic for them for a while. So... yeah. That's really about it.

****Title:**** When You Are Old and Grey and Full of Sleep

>Fandom: Hair, the musical: 2009 Revival/Tour

>Pairing: Claude/Berger, Jeanie/Sheila

>Rating: PG-13, light R, maybe?

>Word Count: 9,756

>Warnings: slash

****Disclaimer:**** Neither the musical nor the boys belong to me, if they did they'd be groping each other on sta-. *pause* *blinkblink* Huh. Look at that... they do. *eg* :D _((Hair was written by James Rado and Gerome Ragni with music by Galt MacDermot.))_ The title is from a poem, "When You Are Old" by William Butler Yeats, and a line further down is a quote from another Yeats poem, "The Second Coming."

****Summary:**** "Normally, Sheila is brazen, goes straight after what she wants whenever she wants it, a conquering general on a battlefield, a fighting wolf that goes straight for the throat.

This... this is different. Jeanie can feel it. This isn't a kiss.
This is a dare."

****_July 22, 2011:_**** Obviously this story is a whole separate, stand alone universe. Honestly, I really kind of like it and want to play in it more, but I think I've actually managed to say all I needed to say in this one story. *snerts* We'll see how long that resolve lasts. ^_~

Enjoy and please remember... comments and reviews are love!

* * *

><p>When You Are Old and Grey and Full of Sleep
>by Renee-chan<p>

Jeanie watches. She watches all the time. It's how she learns things, how she figures people out. It's how she navigates the occasionally choppy waters of the Tribe's internal politics. It's how she knows who's sleeping with who, who isn't sleeping with anyone, who's off limits for the time being... who might need a friend. It's how she identifies problems (and fixes them) before they become disasters.

But this problem... Great Mother Goddess, this problem is too big for her to fix on her own, because it's already a disaster and what's worse, she didn't even see it coming. What problem? Claude. He's slipping away from them, Jeanie can feel it. And with his loss, they'll lose Berger, too, and then it will all fall apart.

The centre cannot hold.

But it has to. Without the Tribe... it doesn't bear thinking about. Too many of them have nowhere else to go, no one else to turn to. Too many of them are too lost as it is. Without the Tribe... No. The Tribe has to stay together. Jeanie won't accept anything else. So, like she always does, Jeanie has to find a way to fix this. And she knows where she has to start. She has to start with Claude. It will be futile and she'll get hurt in the attempt, but she has to at least try. There's always a chance he might listen to reason.

...and pigs might fly.

She gets a chance before the Be-In, catches him standing alone, idly peeling a piece of bark off of a nearby tree. He looks so lost, so alone. Everything about his body language just screams, Stay away from me!, but Jeanie is never one to listen to a warning like that, especially not from Claude. Like so many other things that are bad for her, she just can't stay away from him. There's just something about the myth of the tragic hero - or antihero, as the case may be - that draws her in. There's something broken in Claude and with her maternal instincts in overdrive, Jeanie is almost desperate to fix it, even though she knows she'll fail in the end. Still, she has to try.

Jeanie walks over, grabs onto the fabric of Claude's jacket, gives a tug that jostles his arm, "Claude... why don't you ever call me?"

It's a lame question, an opening gambit already bound to fail before

it's out of her mouth and she knows it. The Slum Goddess of the Lower East Side has no address but the streets or the floors of her friends' apartments, no method of contact but a voice on the wind, a message in a bottle. She has no phone to call. But she has to get him talking somehow and at least the obvious ploy will get his attention.

He snorts, shakes his head at her folly, says almost gently, "Jeanie... you know you don't have a phone."

Of course, she knows. That doesn't matter. What matters is that now, for this small moment, Claude is seeing her. She's brought his attention back from the Great Beyond. She doesn't want to waste it, but she can't help but ask this one question... even though she knows there's no hope of a positive answer. She grips his jacket a little tighter, hates the desperate tone that enters her voice as she asks, "We had fun together, didn't we? You... didn't you like it?"

An even more pathetic gambit than the last and Jeanie curses her own emotions. When she most needs them under control, they trip her up, make her say things that won't help, that may even harm. She isn't what Claude needs, she's known that all along. It would be easier if she were, but she isn't. She's strong, yes, powerful in her own way, but not in the right way. Not for Claude. And he's already checking out of this conversation, she can sense it.

Unwilling to give up just yet, Jeanie reaches for the last card in her hand, something she knows will appeal to her Aquarius. Dropping her hold on Claude's jacket, she pulls out a much abused and tattered book, says, "I found that book I told you about."

Jeanie can't honestly remember if she ever told him about the book, but she knows he'll like it, knows he'll be interested. As enamored as he is with the idea of escape, of invisibility, this will be right up his alley. He turns back, a stay of execution as he says, "What book, Jeanie?"

She holds it up and smiles, triumphant, "The Art And Practice Of Astral Projection by Ophiel."

Claude's eyes widen, his fingers tremble just a fraction as he takes the book from her outstretched hand, as he flips it open to scan the first pages. His face relaxes into a smile and for just one moment, he looks genuinely happy, "Jeanie, this is wild!"

Jeanie reaches out, again grabs at the sleeve of Claude's jacket. He looks so happy... for this one moment, it feels like the ground may stay firm beneath her feet for just a little more... but it's an illusion. She knows it is. A momentary reprieve, nothing more. Her voice drops into a whisper as she finally asks what she truly needs to, "Claude... are you going to burn your draft card?" He turns to stare blankly at her and she tugs on his arm again, irritated by his nonresponse, "At the Be-In, Claude. Are you going to burn your draft card at the Be-In?"

Claude scowls, pulls his arm from her grasp and moves to walk away. He holds up the book like a shield between them, smiles a little sickly, "I'm going to astral project!"

Jeanie frowns, curses to herself, _Touch, Claudio. I gave you that

one, didn't I?_ Knowing that he's reaching the end of his tolerance for her, Jeanie can't help but press, has to ask one more time... even knowing how it will end. She grabs his jacket, this time in both hands, and gives him a small shake as she asks, again, "But are you going to burn your draft card?"

She can see it, that moment when he shuts down for good. His beautiful brown eyes shutter, close off, and his whole body tenses with unhappiness. She's lost him. He's done with this conversation, has had enough of her nagging presence, her mothering attitude. Jeanie braces herself for the blow, but she still isn't ready when it comes and the words ring in her ears for hours afterwards... for days.

~Jeanie... be a good fly. Buzz off.~

* * *

><p>Later that night, Jeanie is still watching. The atmosphere at the Be-In is dark, desperate... primal. The girls mill around, touching each other, soothing, petting, touching the boys, too, clutching, grabbing, trying to hold on. They're afraid. They're all afraid. The boys are scared - scared of being drafted, scared of prison, scared of losing the only life they've ever known. The girls are just as scared - scared of losing the boys they love so much, scared of being alone, scared that they'll wake up one morning and find that the life they live is but a memory.<p>

Jeanie is just as scared but for a different reason. Jeanie is scared because she knows the truth - one day all of this will be just a memory, a story they tell their children of their wild and wacky youth. Their children won't believe them, of course. They'll look at the former members of the Tribe - now lawyers, doctors, teachers and Wall Street tycoons - and they won't believe that these responsible adults were once this rebellious force to be reckoned with, won't believe that they fought against the man as hard as they could... until they finally lost and became him. That thought scares Jeanie more than anything.

She turns, looks over at Berger. He's off by himself, watching the group. She catches him like that sometimes, watching just like she does. Of course, he watches. He feels responsible for these people, these boys and girls that he took in and shaped into a Tribe. He loves them all and Jeanie thinks he knows, thinks he feels the center shaking just as she does. Only he's at just as much of a loss for how to stop it as she is. He's been trying for days, for weeks... ever since Claude got his draft notice. It's the first time in Jeanie's memory that she's seen their Leader floundering so badly and she hasn't yet been able to figure out why. She has to, though. She's running out of time.

Finally done with stalling, one of the boys steps forward, lights his draft card on fire and drops it into the barrel with a wild yip. Jeanie's only surprised that it isn't Berger. Then again, maybe she isn't. He's so preoccupied watching all of them - watching Claude, especially - that he's barely paying attention to himself. It isn't until much later - when he realizes that all but he and Claude have burned their cards - that he steps forward. By then, he's revved up, antsy, too much energy contained for too long, frustration of the highest order pounding through his veins until he can no longer

contain it. He wheels around the can, each step wilder than the last, until he finally comes to a halt behind it, pulls out his card and lowers it into the fire. He stares down into the can, watches the flame start to lick around the edges of the card, watches as they come close to licking at his fingers, too. He stares as though mesmerized, as though lost in the fire. At the last minute, he opens his fingers, yanks his hand back to his chest, nursing the singed digits.

Berger wanders over to Sheila then, folds into her waiting embrace, the heartache rolling off of him in waves that Jeanie can almost see. And as she stands there, watching Berger, watching Sheila... watching Claude... she finally does begin to see. She sees why Berger flounders. She sees why Claude is so lost, so confused. She sees why they aren't able to hold on the way they need to.

There's someone in the way.

She doesn't have long to dwell on that thought, though. Claude has come forward, inch by slow inch, beckoned by Dionne's seductive voice, a voice echoed by the whole Tribe. He comes forward but he isn't there, not really. He doesn't see Dionne beckoning, doesn't see Jeanie clutching her hands to her breast, doesn't see Sheila lost in the beat, in the moment, riding a high of protest. He doesn't see Berger, stepping forward, hand outstretched, urging him on with the silent pleading in his eyes. He doesn't see. He isn't there. For one wild moment, Jeanie wonders if he's astral projected, left his body standing on its own, arm outstretched, holding his draft card high above the flames. After an endless moment, though, he begins to lower his arm. Slowly... slowly... slowly... and at the last minute, the very last second, he pulls it back, saves his card from the fire, holds it close like something precious... like he's sorry he scared it.

Jeanie knows she should have seen it coming, should have known that afternoon that Claude wasn't going to do it. She should have known but she, too, was blinded. For all her watching, she still couldn't see. She didn't want to see. And now this disaster is almost ready to become a tragedy. They're going to lose him. They're going to lose him right now. This will be the moment that they look back on in later years when they're gathered around Claude's grave and say, "If only we'd done it differently..."

No. Jeanie won't have it.

Claude is milling around, muttering to himself, an unbelievable crisis of conscience going on in his head. The others don't know what to do. Berger keeps reaching out, trying to make contact, but he can't. Claude keeps almost reaching back, almost touching... but jerking away at the last moment. And Sheila... Sheila is clutching Berger's hand like a lifeline, eyes wide and hurt, a little betrayed by Claude's refusal to play along as he ought to have, terrified that her plan to save everyone has saved everyone but him... and thus has saved no one.

She's the one in the way.

Finally knowing what she has to do to fix this disaster, what she has to do to stabilize their core again, Jeanie walks over. She takes Berger and Sheila's joined hands in hers, raises them to her lips and

kisses those entwined fingers. They start, both turn to stare at her, and she smiles, slowly pulls their hands apart. They both cry out, soft exhalations of breath, of surprise, both make as if to grab onto each other, again. Jeanie won't let it happen. She raises a hand to Berger's face, shakes her head, then raises Sheila's hand back to her lips and kisses the knuckles. They subside, uncertain what she's about but tentatively willing to play along.

Jeanie lowers her hand to Berger's shoulder, turns him around and gives him a push in Claude's direction. Naked relief in his eyes, Berger doesn't have to be told twice. He races over to Claude, pulls the other boy into his arms when it looks like Claude may bolt. Jeanie can't make out what they say to each other after that, but it's intense, a storm of emotion, need, desire. It ends with Claude wrapped in Berger, clutching the other man to him and sobbing.

Yessss.

Sheila jerks her hand in Jeanie's grasp, clearly wants to go to her boys, comfort them, but Jeanie won't allow it. Not this time. Like a mother denying her child that extra sweet before bed, Jeanie knows she has to deny Sheila this. No matter how she may beg, no matter how she may cry or throw a tantrum, for once, Jeanie knows what's best for all of them and she will see this through for all their sakes. She smiles softly to herself, shakes her head, thinks, _They'll understand when they're older. They'll thank me, then._

She keeps hold of Sheila for the rest of the night, tries to keep track of Claude and Berger, too, but it's too much to watch all at once. She loses sight of the boys, doesn't know where they've gone, but for once, she's willing to trust that Berger understands, that he knows what he has to do... that he'll keep Claude safe for them.

She has to stay focused on Sheila. And she will.

* * *

><p>The next day, Claude and Berger are gone, disappeared like the smoke rising from the fire of the night before. Sheila is agitated, nervous, anxiety-ridden like Jeanie has never seen her. She's had control taken away from her by a truly unexpected source and she doesn't know how to get it back. Jeanie can sympathize. She lost control of her life years ago and hasn't been able to rest it back since. She's learned to live with that loss of control, learned to accept it, sometimes even to appreciate it. Sheila won't be able to do that. Sheila is too strong, too willful, to accept that there are some things she can't do, can't have, can't be. Sheila will never be able to sit idly by and let events run their course. It's part of why Jeanie admires her.<p>

Sheila has dragged them all over the city today - Times Square, Washington Square, Central Park, the Carlyle, the Museum of Natural History, Greenwich Village, Grand Central Station - anywhere and everywhere that she can think of where her lost boys might be. But Berger is even better at not being found than Sheila is at finding. If he's gone to ground somewhere with Claude, Sheila will never find them, not even with the entire will of the Tribe behind her.

And now... Jeanie is tired. She's tired of walking, tired of seeking

and not finding, tired of Sheila's frantic energy rolling over her. She's tired of fighting with her own body to get it to do the things she wishes, tired of her aching back, her swollen ankles and the hunger for bizarre foods she normally disdains and can't even afford. She's tired of always being second best, fifth wheel, last picked for the team. She's tired of doing the right thing and getting nothing but scorn for it. She's tired of no one ever listening to her because, really... what would she know, right? Flighty, "only good for a laugh or a lay" Jeanie. She's tired of being her, of being trapped in that life. She's just tired. And she's not taking another step on this wild goose chase.

As Sheila gathers her legs to get up off the park bench they've settled on to rest, Jeanie has finally had enough. She grabs the other girl's hand and pulls her back down, clearly with more strength than Sheila anticipated judging by how hard the petite brunette tumbles against her when she lands. They stare at each other from inches away, Sheila's left hand braced against Jeanie's right shoulder, their opposite hands still twined together, startled brown eyes meeting calm blue. Jeanie smiles reassuringly, lifts her right hand to pat Sheila's cheek and says, "Sheila... just stop. Berger doesn't want to be found, so we're not going to find him. Running us ragged trying isn't going to change that." When Sheila opens her mouth to deny Jeanie's words, Jeanie just shakes her head, "You know that, Sheila. I know you do. So, just... stop."

They stare at each other for a moment more, Jeanie's gaze steady, sure, confident in a way it hasn't been in years, Sheila's uncertain, unhappy... lost. Finally, Sheila's lower lip trembles and her elbow collapses, spilling her into Jeanie's waiting embrace. She doesn't cry - Jeanie isn't sure the older girl even knows how - but she shakes, small trembles running through her frame as she rests against Jeanie, clutches her fingers in the other girl's shirt. Jeanie just holds her, runs her fingers through Sheila's hair and makes whatever soothing noises she can come up with. It isn't easy, giving up control. Jeanie knows it. And it's harder for Sheila than most, but this is for the best. This is what has to be done to keep Claude safe... and Jeanie will do anything to keep Claude safe. Anything.

After a few minutes, Sheila pushes herself back upright, wipes a hand across still dry eyes and stands up. Jeanie looks up at her, waiting for the older girl to take the lead, to make a decision... to start them chasing all over Manhattan again. But she doesn't. She just stands there, head bowed, fiddling with the zipper on her jacket. And to her own surprise, Jeanie finds that taking back control may not be so hard after all. She can't do it for herself, she's tried. But for Sheila? For her unborn child? For Claude? Maybe she can.

Jeanie stands, takes Sheila's hand, rubs her thumb over those tense knuckles. She smiles, says softly, "It's OK. I understand." When Sheila looks up, eyes miserable and so, so much younger than Jeanie is used to seeing them, Jeanie raises her hand and brushes a soft caress against the other girl's cheek, "I do. It's hard to let go. But if you love someone..." She trails off, knows from the look in Sheila's eyes that she doesn't need to finish the quote, that the other girl understands her meaning.

Sheila nods, takes a deep breath, grips Jeanie's hand a little tighter. Jeanie imparts one more caress before turning and tugging

Sheila after her. This docility, it disturbs her, but Jeanie knows it won't last, knows that Sheila is just overwhelmed, letting her heart rule her brain in such a way that she can't untangle it. And it really is OK. Jeanie can do this, can take the lead for now, and she will. She has to.

Jeanie leads them back to Sheila's apartment, waits patiently while the other girl fumbles for her keys, finally takes them from her and ushers them inside. They have a difficult conversation coming and Jeanie doesn't want to have it out in the hallway. Sheila is so used to being the one to fix everything. She won't like that the only way she can fix this is to stand aside and do nothing, will be convinced that there is something she needs to do or be or say... something that isn't nothing. Jeanie has to show her otherwise.

The apartment is empty when they get there, Suzanne off with Walter and Crissy with Angela. Jeanie is grateful for that, planned it that way. She wants no distractions for this. Sheila putters around for a while, opens and closes the refrigerator, a few cabinets, finally puts some water up to boil for tea, all that nervous energy needing an outlet of some sort. When she finally calms, she turns towards Jeanie, eyes accusing, "Why did you stop me? Why didn't you let me go after them at the Be-In?"

And there it is. Jeanie knew it was coming, had known since she first pulled Sheila and Berger apart last night. She sighs, leans forward to cross her arms on the kitchen table, decides that blunt has always been the best way to handle Sheila and that this conversation is no different. Meeting those accusing brown eyes head on, she says, "You're not the one, Sheila. You know it. I know it. The whole Tribe knows it. The only one who doesn't know it is Claude."

Sheila draws in a sharp breath, turns away to fiddle with the tea kettle for a minute before answering, "What do you mean?"

"You know exactly what I mean, Sheila," Jeanie says in response, "I know you love them - and to be fair, they love you, too - but it isn't you. You aren't the one who can make him stay. Only Berger can do that. I think you know that. I think you've known that for months. Haven't you?"

Sheila's breath hitches, tangles with her words in her throat in such a way that they come out harsh, rough, "But I love him. I love both of them. Why isn't that enough?"

Jeanie braces her hands on the table, pushes herself out of her chair and moves to stand in front of the other girl. She pauses there until Sheila looks up then says, "Sheila, you know that, too. Despite the song, love is never all you need. You love them, but you don't understand them, not the way they do each other. You never will. And right now they both need that understanding more than they need love. That's why it isn't you. That's why it has to be Berger."

Sheila's voice is small with her next words, her hands clutching white-knuckled at the counter behind her, "But... what about me? What about what I need? Without them... Jeanie, what will I do without them?"

Jeanie steps forward, deliberately invading Sheila's personal space. Reaching around behind Sheila, she takes the other girl's hands in

hers and pulls them forward, raises them up to place soft kisses on Sheila's knuckles in an echo of the act that touched this off to begin with. She says, "You're strong. You've always been strong. You always will be strong. You don't need Berger for that. You don't need Claude. You just need you." Jeanie laughs, throws her arms wide with Sheila's hands still clutched in hers, "Jesus. You're Sheila fucking Franklin! What will you do? Whatever the hell you want to, man!"

Sheila is startled into a laugh by that, throws her head back and laughs along with Jeanie. It's only when she drops her gaze back down that she realizes how close that action has brought them. With both of their arms outstretched and Jeanie's belly round between them, the only thing separating them from each other is the cloth of their shirts. Sheila smiles, brings her arms down and forward, wrapping them as far around Jeanie as they will go. With their hands still intertwined this traps Jeanie's arms behind her back. Sheila's smile settles into a smirk, "Whatever I want to, huh? What if what I _want_... is to do this?"

Sheila leans up, then, presses her lips to Jeanie's. The kiss is soft, gentle, chaste. It doesn't demand anything but Jeanie's attention, doesn't ask anything either. It isn't Sheila's usual kiss. Normally, Sheila is brazen, goes straight after what she wants whenever she wants it, a conquering general on a battlefield, a fighting wolf that goes straight for the throat. This... this is different. Jeanie can feel it. This isn't a kiss. This is a dare.

Jeanie smiles against Sheila's mouth. This certainly wasn't what she'd intended when she brought Sheila here tonight, but even she can't say that it's an unwelcome turn of events. Far from it. She's admired Sheila for a long time, wished she had the strength to be more like her... wished she had someone with that kind of strength at her side that she could rely on. So, maybe... just maybe... this is finally the right time to say so.

Exerting her own strength, Jeanie shifts her hands in Sheila's grip, uses the advantage of her height to switch their positioning so that Jeanie's arms are now encircling Sheila and holding the smaller girl's hands behind _her_ back. And Sheila... her eyes are twinkling with that dare, almost desperate for some kind of distraction from the stresses of the day, from the harsh truths that Jeanie has just lashed her with. It may not be everything that Jeanie wants, still makes her feel a little like she's second best... but isn't Sheila second best for her, too? Fair's fair, she supposes. Well, Jeanie is good for a distraction. She's good for a lot of things, actually, and rather than feeling shame over it, right now, she's just grateful. Deliberately pressing Sheila back and bending her just slightly over the counter, Jeanie moves her lips against Sheila's, slowly coaxes the other girl's open under hers.

Sheila's body stills against her, a little surprised that Jeanie took her up on that unspoken dare, but when Jeanie slips her tongue into the older girl's mouth to stroke softly against her own, Sheila moans into the kiss and grips Jeanie's hands hard in hers behind her back. Jeanie pulls her mouth away, bends her head to press her lips against the column of Sheila's neck and Sheila's hands jerk in her grip. Jeanie just smiles again and sucks hard at the skin beneath her lips. When she raises her head to meet Sheila's eyes, the pupils are

dilated, the brown of the irises narrowed to bare rings around them. Jeanie smirks, "And what if you do?"

Sheila blinks at Jeanie's words, eyes momentarily confused as though she's forgotten that words have meaning. Jeanie leans down to press another soft kiss against Sheila's cheek, can't help but think that she likes her this way, can't help but think that she understands why both Berger and Claude were drawn to the young activist. That blend of strength and neediness, that blend of naughty and innocent... Jeanie could see the unpredictable paradox of it becoming addicting very quickly.

And whatever it is that Sheila sees in her eyes as she stares back, she smiles, pupils returning to normal as she flexes her arms, testing Jeanie's grip. Jeanie just raises an eyebrow and tightens her hold, an answering dare in her eyes. Sheila laughs, low and throaty, "Well, I guess that depends on what you want, doesn't it?"

As Jeanie bends her head to claim Sheila's lips once more, she can't help but think that no, this wasn't what she had intended at all... but she's never been one to look a gift horse in the mouth, so why start now?

* * *

><p>It's another two days before they emerge from Sheila's apartment and Jeanie is almost sorry that they have to at all. The last two days have been... well, they've been the best two days Jeanie has had in a long time. And it wasn't just about the sex. Sheila... she's been attentive, caring, considerate in a way that most of the boys haven't been, most of the girls, too. It was nice to be cared for, to be pampered for a time. Jeanie misses it already.<p>

There's a bite in the air as they leave the apartment, a chill that lets Jeanie know that winter is finally on its way. For just a moment, she lets herself think of what it would be like to be tucked away in Sheila's apartment when the cold weather comes, just her and the baby and Sheila's attentive caring. It would be so nice...

But Jeanie doesn't have any illusions. Whatever this was, these last few days, it wasn't love. Not the forever-after-marry-you kind, anyway. It isn't what she feels for Claude or what Sheila feels for Berger. She isn't naive enough to think that that kind of love can spring up practically over night. But still... it's a nice dream.

Sheila's hand is warm around hers as they walk uptown and Jeanie smiles as she's tugged along. That's her Sheila. Faith restored, determination goaded, back in the lead with the bit in her teeth. That's how Jeanie likes her - strong, capable, knowing exactly what she wants and how to get it. That's what they all need right now. Especially now. Crissy had called them from a payphone that morning, told Sheila that she'd heard from Woof and that Woof had found Berger and Claude... or rather that they'd found him. And so the Tribe was gathering, marshalling their forces, preparing for one last battle to try to convince Claude to stay.

When they reach the old warehouse that is their chosen location for their all-night Be-Ins, Jeanie is unsure what they will find, unsure if she wants to know. And she's worried, worried that in her joy at

seeing them again Sheila will forget what Jeanie told her... will forget Jeanie, too. And Jeanie finds that as flutteringly happy as she is to see Claude again, a growing part of her doesn't want to give Sheila up. As though sensing Jeanie's turmoil, Sheila stops them just outside the warehouse, tugs Jeanie into the shadows of the alleyway and presses her back against the wall. Jeanie isn't sure what she's about, starts to ask a question only to have it silenced by the firm pressure of Sheila's lips on hers. The gentle friction is a soft caress, a reassurance, and Jeanie moans quietly into it as Sheila reaches a hand around behind her and gently massages her lower back, easing the tension that Jeanie hadn't even been aware was building. Sheila's good at that, easing tension, and it still catches Jeanie off guard when she does it because it isn't something she normally thinks of when thinking of Sheila. In her mind, Sheila has always been more a _creator_ of tension than one who eases it. Discovering this other side to her was a pleasant surprise.

When Sheila feels her relax, she smiles, slides that hand around to rest against Jeanie's belly, drops her head to rest between Jeanie's breasts. Jeanie cradles her there for a minute, reassured more than she can express by the twofold heartbeat in line below her own: Sheila's and her unborn child's. As the three hearts slowly draw into sync, Jeanie smiles, too, drops a kiss on the top of Sheila's head and says, "OK. I'm ready. Let's go in."

Sheila straightens, takes Jeanie's hand back into hers and leads them inside. The Tribe is gathered in a circle around Claude and Berger, all chattering animatedly, but Jeanie doesn't care about them. She only cares about Claude. And Claude... great Mother Goddess, the change in him is unbelievable. He's smiling - _really_ smiling - for the first time in weeks, months... maybe since before they met. And Berger is positively glowing with proud energy.

Jeanie doesn't want to do anything to break the moment, almost pulls Sheila back outside, but she isn't fast enough. They notice Jeanie and Sheila at the same time, turn to look at them with gentle smiles on their faces. Claude speaks first, says softly, "Hey, Sheila. Hey, Jeanie."

And Sheila does exactly what Jeanie feared she would, all but explodes with, "'Hey, Sheila?' Is that the best you can do? We were all worried sick! We looked all over for you, searched this city like maniacs! Where were you?"

Jeanie winces, tries to hush the other girl, but Sheila won't be hushed. She's been calm and domestic for three days and needs to ****do**** something. But this time Berger's ready for her. He smirks and slides a possessive arm around Claude's waist to pull him closer, "Where were we, Sheila-baby?" He snickers, "We went down to the army 'abduction center.' 39 Whitehall Street."

The entire Tribe falls silent at that. Even Sheila has nothing to say. Now, this... oh great goddess, this was not what Jeanie intended when she let them go off together. She clutches tightly at Sheila's hand, asks in a voice breathless with panic, "You... Berger, what did you do?"

He laughs then, slides a leg between Claude's and leans in to kiss the other boy. When he leans back he turns to waggle his eyebrows at Jeanie, "We freaked 'em out. All the way. As far as we could go."

They'll be drafting little old ladies before they agree to take either of us."

Sheila's face is torn between trying to express horror and joy. Finally she gets out, "Banana-Berger... What did you **do**?"

Claude finally takes pity on them and with a broad smile says, "I took him down to the induction center, told them he was my girlfriend and that I couldn't sleep without him."

Sliding a hand down the back of Claude's pants, Berger smirks, "And then we may have, uh... given them a little demonstration. In case they didn't understand."

At Claude's blush and Berger's leering grin the entire Tribe explodes into laughter. Jeanie all but falls, her relief is so great, but Sheila holds her upright, one hand still gripped tightly in hers. The party really gets started after that, joints passing quickly between the Tribe members as they are lit up and passed around. Jeanie notices early that Claude and Berger have retreated to a corner of the warehouse, focused purely on each other, at peace for the first time in months. Jeanie turns to look for Woof or Crissy or any number of other Tribe members with whom she'll usually share herself while high... only to run straight into Sheila.

Sheila smiles softly at her, raises a hand to caress Jeanie's cheek, leans closer to share another soft kiss. When she pulls back, her eyes are serene, smiling, "We don't give you enough credit, Jeanie. Not nearly enough. I don't know how you knew what needed to be done to get him to stay, but I'm more grateful than I can say... even if he's no longer mine. Even if I've lost them both. I don't care. I'd rather lose them to each other than lose them to the war. So, Jeanie... thank you. Just, thank you."

Overwhelmed at the unexpected praise, Jeanie ducks her head, mumbles out something that's close enough to "You're welcome" for Sheila to understand, then tries to pull away. Sheila isn't having it. She takes possessive hold of Jeanie's hand once again, pulls her away from the group towards a little pallet of blankets and pillows she's put together from the supplies they keep here. She tugs Jeanie's hand until the taller girl joins her on the ground, takes a puff of the joint Jeanie holds out to her before passing it on to the next person who reaches for it. Sheila lays back against the pillows, pulls gently at Jeanie's body until Jeanie lays down facing her. She then bends one leg and slides it beneath Jeanie's rounded belly, supporting the weight of her unborn child, bends the other leg and slides it between Jeanie's to take the pressure off her hip and back. They'd done this before over the last few days, Sheila claiming to have read it in a book and Jeanie so relieved to have a reprieve from that never-ending ache that she just didn't care. Sheila tugs her closer so that Jeanie can pillow her head on the other girl's breast.

This... great goddess, it's the closest Jeanie has felt to being protected, to being safe and loved since she'd been a child in her mother's embrace. She smiles, nuzzles softly at the breast beneath her cheek and Sheila huffs out a short laugh, starts stroking her hands through Jeanie's hair and down her back. After a few minutes of silence, of lazy stroking and almost gentle fanning of the banked flame of desire between them, Sheila says quietly, almost reverently,

"Jeanie... I'd like to offer you something, but I don't want to offend you."

Jeanie raises her head, watches Sheila for a moment before shrugging, "I don't offend easily, Sheila. You should know that by now."

Sheila smiles in response. She does know. Finally she says, "I know how proud you are of providing for yourself, how proud you are to be the 'mother' of the streets, and I don't want to take that away from you, but Jeanie... there's a place in my home for you, if you want it."

Jeanie pulls back then, sits up. She's almost afraid, afraid of how much she wants what Sheila is offering - a home, a loving embrace... someone to call her own. But she isn't sure that that's what Sheila is offering, doesn't want to be taken in out of a misplaced sense of gratitude or as a replacement for the boys that Sheila is losing. She wants to be taken in for herself, loved for herself, valued for herself. And she can't even imagine what value Sheila might see in her, Sheila who is strong and proud and beautiful and so much more than Jeanie will ever be. She swallows hard, says, "It's a generous offer."

Sheila sits up next to her, slides a hand into the hair at the nape of Jeanie's neck, presses a kiss to the underside of Jeanie's jaw. Leaning in, she whispers into Jeanie's ear, "No... it's a selfish one." At Jeanie's startled look, Sheila smiles, caresses the taller girl's cheek with her thumb, "Jeanie, these last few days with you... I haven't been that happy in some time. I enjoyed taking care of you, being with you. I loved that when I needed someone to take care of me... you did. I love that you think first of everyone else and only then of yourself. And I think that maybe it's time someone put you first, since you don't. You talked about Claude being the center of our Tribe, what holds us together... but Jeanie, a circle has two centers." At Jeanie's confused look, Sheila explains, "A circle is just a special kind of ellipse, Jeanie. And an ellipse has two centers... it's just that in a circle, the two centers lie on top of each other."

Jeanie's eyes widen in surprise at Sheila's words and she can't think of a single thing to say. What Sheila is implying, Jeanie can't even comprehend. She isn't that important. And she must have managed to say so out loud because Sheila is shaking her head, opens her mouth to speak, "You are. You watch everyone, keep tabs on us, always step in to help before things get out of control. Jeanie, you're just as important to this Tribe as Claude. I'm only sorry I didn't see it sooner. I'd like a chance to make up for that."

Jeanie's smile in response is radiant, glowing with happiness like a small sun. She doesn't have the words to answer, but she nods her head almost frantically. Sheila laughs, tugs her back down onto the blankets and into her arms. And as their three heartbeats once again fall into sync, Jeanie can't help but feel that she's finally found what she's been watching for all along.

* * *

><p>~~*~~Epilogue~~*~~**

* * *

><p>It is Sheila at Jeanie's side a month later when she gives birth to a beautiful baby girl. The child has bright blue eyes and dark blonde hair and is born under the sign of the Capricorn. She could be anyone's... she could be Claude's. She could be, and Jeanie alone knows the truth. She tells herself that Claude's obvious relief at her repeated reassurances that the baby isn't his doesn't hurt... even if she knows she's lying about that. But Sheila is there with gentle hands and kind words and supporting arms and Jeanie is so grateful for her friend that she doesn't spend much time dwelling on it.<p>

It is Sheila she turns to two days later, tears in her eyes and sorrow in her heart as she admits that she thought all this time that she was carrying a boy... and that she was so sure they were going to lose Claude that she was going to name her child after him. And now that Fate has pulled the rug out from under her at the last minute, she doesn't know what to name her own child, can't pick one out of the myriad options open to her. It is Sheila who smiles at her, holds her close and calmly tells her the name of her little girl... the words that Sheila has always associated in her mind with the child's mother: Faith Abigail... faith and joy. It's perfect.

A few months later when Faith's eyes shade towards green, finally settle into an earth-toned hazel, when her hair darkens from blonde to a deep mahogany brown, Jeanie laughs, unsurprised. Then again, she alone knows the truth of the child's parentage. Jeanie laughs harder when they go out, the three of them together, and people exclaim over how beautiful Sheila's baby is, at how impressed they are that she's kept her figure. Sheila blushes, stammers, tries to explain that the baby _isn't_ hers, but Jeanie has so much fun seeing her offset that she feeds into the teasing, tells people that Sheila's just too modest and really, she _is_ a wonderful mother... because she is.

Another six months beyond that, Sheila is the one by her side when Faith speaks her first word. Neither one is surprised that that word is "mama." It causes a certain amount of hysterical laughter, however, when both women realize that the child was referring to Sheila when she said it. Rather than be jealous over the slip, Jeanie just smiles, pulls a mortified Sheila into her arms and kisses her breathless.

* * *

><p>Two years later, it is Jeanie's turn to be at Sheila's side, along with the bright little girl they now both consider their daughter, as Sheila walks across the stage at NYU and accepts her diploma. The whole Tribe is there, in fact, cheering her on. Claude and Berger are right up beside Jeanie, Claude's eyes fixed on Berger as he plays with Faith, something indefinably sad swimming in the their depths. Jeanie doesn't understand it, doesn't even want to ask, but she suspects that a time will come when he will, starts to fear the dropping of that other shoe for a whole new reason.

When Faith is five, Sheila takes the day off from law school to sit by Jeanie's side as she mourns her daughter's absence from their home during the day. She strokes Jeanie's hair and whispers soothing nothings, tells her that it's just kindergarten, that every child has to go sometime, that she can't keep their daughter at home with her

forever. It prompts the first real argument that they've ever had and Jeanie knows it isn't rational when it happens, apologizes immediately afterwards. Sheila is quietly accepting, knows that Jeanie is just upset, that she just needed to lash out at someone.

Sheila doesn't bring it up again but two days later she leaves a brochure on the kitchen table when she leaves for the day. It's a listing of art classes offered at the local rec center. Jeanie doesn't say anything about it either, but she knows what Sheila is getting at. She's lived the last six years of her life purely for someone else and it's time she took a little time for herself, now. Jeanie smiles at that gentle reminder of what Sheila had told her all those years ago - that she wanted to be the one who put Jeanie first. Jeanie thanks her by dropping Faith off at Claude and Berger's for the night and by signing up for a pottery class the next day. It's hard to say which action Sheila is more appreciative of.

* * *

><p>By the time Faith is in third grade, things are very different. Jeanie has progressed from taking pottery classes to teaching them, is slowly building an inventory of pieces to set up her own shop. Sheila has graduated law school and is pursuing a judgeship. Berger has surprised them all by getting his G.E.D. and going back to school to get a degree in education. He's teaching kindergarten, now, and even Sheila can't argue that it's a perfect match. He's always been wonderful with Faith, after all. Claude, however, is taking a little longer to find his way. He drifts from job to job, takes a class here, a class there, never quite able to figure out where he belongs in life.<p>

Secretly, Jeanie fears that Claude, too, thinks he was supposed to die in Viet Nam, worries that some day he may try to fulfill that destiny just because he can't find a purpose in his life. Jeanie shares her fears with Sheila, frets over how Claude still seems so lost, sometimes. Sheila doesn't have a good answer for her and it prompts the second major argument between them. This one takes longer to cool.

It's during that cooling off period that Claude finally comes to Jeanie with the question that she's been dreading for years. He's a little drunk, very upset and Jeanie can almost feel the center of their bizarre dual family starting to shake loose again as he blurts it out, "Jeanie... you've been so determined to keep me and Berger in your daughter's life and I've always wondered why. I... I think maybe I know, but I need... Please... please, I need to know for sure. Is Faith mine? I need to know if she's mine..." Jeanie doesn't know what to say as he collapses against her, buries his face in her stomach and clutches her tightly to him, his tears soaking into the fabric of her shirt.

When she tells him "No" this time, she knows it's the wrong answer even before it leaves her lips. The grief in his eyes as he's forced to let go of the dream Jeanie hadn't even been aware he'd been harboring cuts her to the quick. She doesn't want to tell him the rest, but feels she owes it to him, gets it out as quickly as she can, "Claudio... she's Berger's."

The small sob Claude lets out then all but tears Jeanie's heart in

two, "How... how long have you known?"

"Since she was born. Claudio... I was never as free with my affections as I let everyone believe. It wasn't that hard to figure out. The only other man around that time was Hud... and he's obviously not the father. You were about a month too late for it to be you. I just didn't want anyone to know, thought it might be too hard on everyone if I told," is Jeanie's quiet answer.

Claude quiets then, but it's a pregnant stillness, one which Jeanie knows will birth a truth she isn't ready for. He says, "I think he knows. I think he's known for a while, Jeanie. Every time I bring it up, wondering if she's mine, if you'd lied about that, he ducks his head, won't look at me. He knows, Jeanie."

Jeanie finally drops down on the ground next to him, raises her hands to cup his face, eyes shining with sudden understanding, "Claude... you wanted her to be yours, didn't you?"

Claude nods almost frantically in Jeanie's hold, eyes more desolate than she's seen them in years. She sighs, presses a soft kiss to his lips, "Claudio... do you want a child?"

Claude's eyes widen then, his mouth opens and closes several times, not a single word emerging. Finally he nods again, a fresh set of tears following after the others, long dried. Jeanie leans forward, presses another gentle kiss to Claude's lips then pulls out a handkerchief and dries his tears. She smiles softly as she helps him to his feet, "Then here's what we're going to do. You're going to talk to Berger and I'm going to talk to Sheila, then we're all going to talk. If everyone is on board... then this is one wish I'd be honored to help come true."

* * *

><p>One year later, in early September, Sheila isn't the only one at Jeanie's side as she screams her way through yet another contraction. Faith is there, helping the midwife - her beloved Aunt Crissy - as she has with so many other births. Her chirping little voice is reassuring, comforting, a beautiful backdrop to remind Jeanie that there is a reason that she's doing this.<p>

Berger is there, too, eyes wide and horrified every time Jeanie screams, as he puts together that it was his fault that she'd already been through this once before. Jeanie wants to take a moment to comfort him, to tell him that it's OK, that she doesn't mind... but right at this exact moment that would be a lie so she doesn't bother.

Claude isn't doing much better. Well, that isn't exactly true. He's been doing much better. Finally having the question of Faith's parentage answered and out in the open has done him wonders, allowed him to put a closure on the past. He's made peace with his parents, he's gotten a steady job, started taking classes at night. After all these years, he's finally getting his life back on track and he's turned out to have a better head for business than Jeanie could ever hope to have, has started helping her make the dream of having her own store to sell her pottery into a reality. But that doesn't mean he's being any more helpful than Berger is right now. When he asks, for the thirteenth time, if Jeanie is OK, Jeanie finally gets fed up,

screams that she's not fucking OK and she won't be fucking OK until this is all over and he should just be fucking grateful that oxytocin helps a woman forget how fucking painful this is or she'd never have agreed to do it a second time for him. She then orders both him and Berger out into the living room. She's had enough.

They flee the room like chastised little boys, whispering harshly at each other as they debate exactly who got them kicked out. Sheila shakes her head in disgust, presses a cool cloth against Jeanie's neck, "Men."

Jeanie laughs, her voice breathless with exhaustion, "Just think... if not for my intervening, you'd still be stuck with both of them."

Sheila wrinkles her nose then laughs along with her, "Perish the thought!" She leans down to press a soft kiss against Jeanie's temple, "I'd rather have you any day."

The next contraction prevents Jeanie from answering but brings with it the most beautiful words she's heard in years as Crissy says, "OK, Jeanie! It's time. Give me all you've got!" The next few minutes feel like hours but when they're over Jeanie has in her arms... another beautiful baby girl. She looks down at the baby's bright blue eyes and corn silk curls of blonde hair, then looks up at Sheila... and laughs and laughs and laughs.

* * *

><p>Two years later, Jeanie's studio is doing well enough that they decide that it's time to move out of Sheila's tiny apartment in the Village and into a larger home. This causes the third major argument of Jeanie and Sheila's relationship. Sheila sees how dangerous the city is growing, sees the decline in the school systems and wants to relocate to the suburbs, somewhere where it will be safer for Faith to live, where she'll have a better life. Jeanie wants to stay in the city, near her business, her friends, the fathers of her children... her daughter.<p>

She shows up on Claude and Berger's doorstep that night, wild-eyed and distraught, nearly inconsolable at the thought of leaving her second child. Amanda hears her mother in the living room and toddles out of her bedroom as fast as her little legs can carry her. When she sees the state her mother is in, however, she hesitates and this brings on a fresh set of tears. Berger and Claude share a significant look over Jeanie's head and Berger scoops the little girl up to go tuck her into bed, promises her an extra long story to get her to cooperate.

Claude pulls Jeanie over to the couch, holds her against him until she's ready to talk. Eventually she manages to tell him what's wrong, that she knows that Sheila's right, that it'll be safer for Faith if they leave the city, but that she couldn't bear to be that far from Amanda, that it was already hard enough living several blocks away. By then, Berger has emerged from Amanda's bedroom. He and Claude share several more significant looks over Jeanie's head. Before either man can say anything, though, there is a knock on the door. It's Sheila and Faith.

Sheila is all apologies, can't get them out fast enough for her peace

of mind or slow enough to be understandable. Faith finally gets fed up, rolls her eyes at her mother and walks over to pat Jeanie's hand, "Mom, we talked about it and we came up with a compromise. I can go to private school. It may not be safer, but at least it'll be a better school. Then we can stay here. How does that sound?"

It's on the tip of Jeanie's tongue to agree, but Berger beats her to it, "Actually... Claudio and I had a different compromise in mind." Once he has both women's attention, he says, "Ever since Amanda was born, Claude's mother's been bothering us to move closer so she can see her granddaughter more often. Before this year it really wasn't financially possible, but now with both of us working, we can just about swing it. When his father offered to help out with the down payment on a house that kind of clinched it, so I started sending out feelers to see if I could get a job out on the Island. Looks like there are a few openings, so..." He shrugs.

Sheila just stares, "So, what you're saying is that you'd be willing to move out there with us?"

Claude smiles, pulls Jeanie closer and places a gentle kiss on her cheek, "We wouldn't want to break up our beautifully non-traditional little family, would we?"

Jeanie shakes her head, her heart beating too rapidly to allow her to think clearly. All she can manage to get out is, "What about the studio?"

"Jeanie, at least half of your customers are special orders from the craft fairs we go to. Another half of the ones remaining are pretty faithful repeat customers. As long as we're willing to ship, I think they'd stay with you. Because I suspected this was going to come up, I've been crunching the numbers ever since Berger and I started to seriously consider moving. It might be tight for a few months, but I think we could relocate the storefront without too much difficulty. Besides, rent's cheaper on the Island," is Claude's calm response.

And neither Jeanie nor Sheila can think of another objection to raise after that.

* * *

><p>Six months later, they've found the perfect spot: two houses on opposite sides of the block, the backyards bordering on each other, both for sale and move-in ready. Claude and Berger even let Jeanie and Sheila have first pick between the two. It's the work of three days to get the two families moved into the houses, the work of one afternoon for the two men to put a gate between the yards, giving the girls free run of both yards and houses. It may be a strange arrangement, but it works and its perfect in its own strange way.<p>

Sitting on her screened in porch with a glass of iced tea in one hand and a drowsy Sheila draped warm against her other side, watching Faith and Amanda playing in the backyard while Claude and Berger put up the new swing set in the other yard, Jeanie can't believe her good fortune. Ten years ago, she never would have believed that such happiness was possible, especially not for her. Ten years ago, she never would have dared to reach for it. Ten years ago, she was a

different person, a weaker person. Today, thanks to the woman at her side, she's anything but... and she couldn't be happier.

Sheila pushes herself up on her elbow to look down at Jeanie with a soft smile on her face, "Penny for your thoughts?"

Jeanie puts her glass down and reaches up to cup Sheila's face, pulls her down for a kiss. When they pull apart, Jeanie smiles up at Sheila and simply says, "I love you," then with a soft smirk says, "Penny for yours?"

And the shine of the bright sunlight outside is no match for the shine in Sheila's eyes as she bends to claim Jeanie's lips once more, her answering words echoing in the warm afternoon air, "Jeanie... I love you, too."

* * *

><p>AN:**

Oi. It's too hot for author's notes. Maybe if I'm feeling inspired later I'll add some chibi silliness. :-P Not now. Too hot. Want Red Mango. Don't want to go _get_ Red Mango. Anyone wanna go for me? Pinkberry would be OK, too. Ugh.

Questions, comments, kiwi?

End
file.